The Root of All Things

An exploration of the Mūlapariyāyasutta, the first discourse of the Middle Length Sayings.

At one time the Buddha was staying near Ukkaṭṭhā, in the Subhaga Forest at the root of a magnificent sal tree.

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A Fundamental Teaching is Offered

“Mendicants, I will teach you the explanation of the root of all things. Listen and apply your minds well, I will speak.”

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The Two Steps of Cognition: Perceiving vs. Conceiving

Perceive (Sanjānāti)

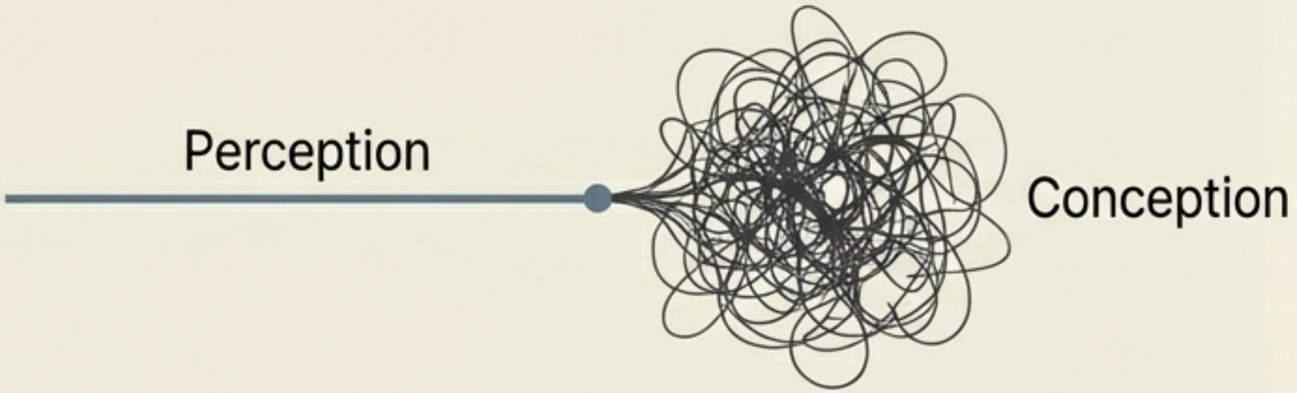
The raw, initial contact with a phenomenon. The direct, unfiltered experience.

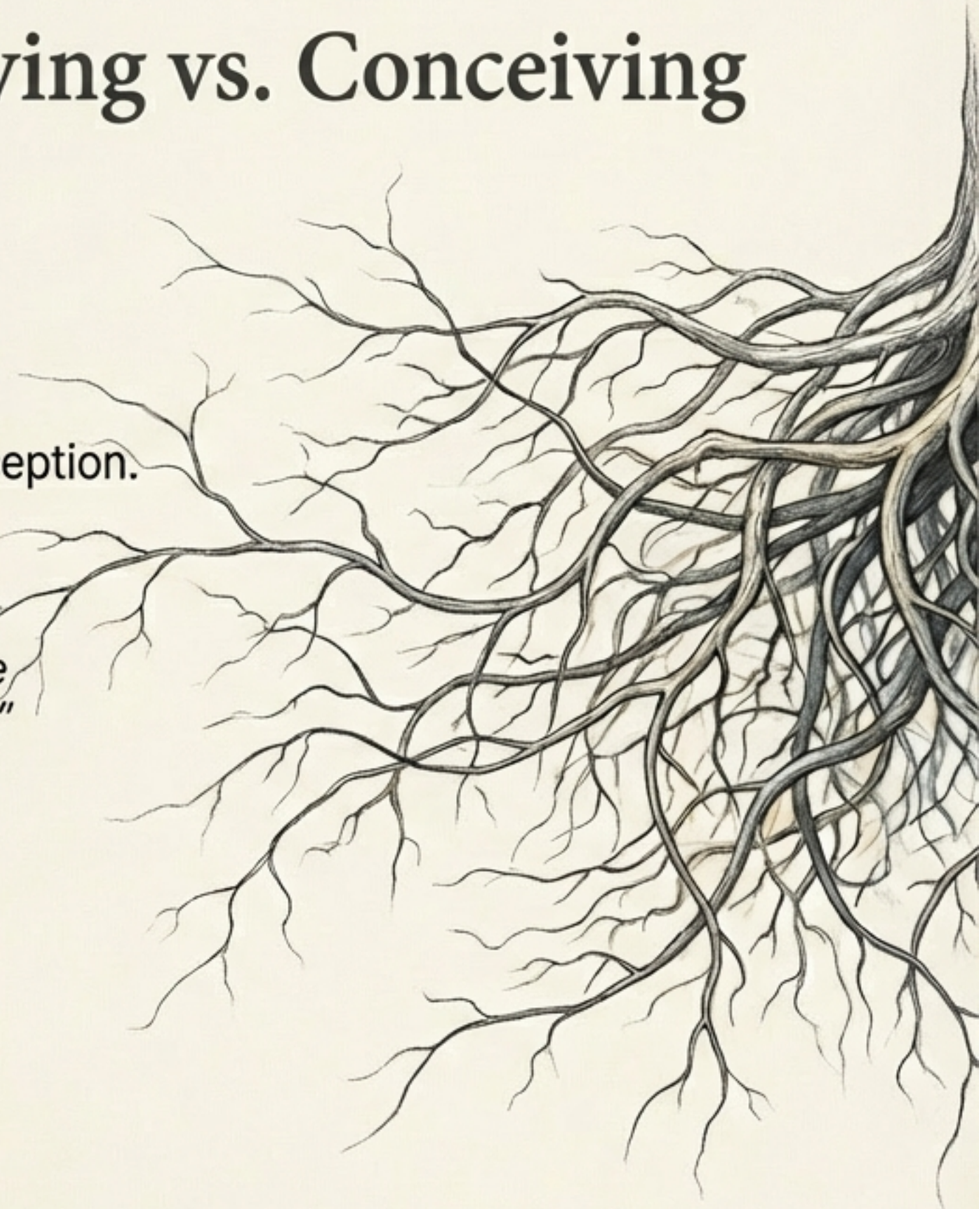
Example from text: "They perceive earth as earth."

Conceive (Mannati)

The mental proliferation that follows perception. It is the act of personalizing, identifying with, and creating a 'self' in relation to the perception.

Example from text: "...they conceive it to be earth, they conceive it in earth, they conceive it as earth, they conceive that 'earth is mine', they approve earth."





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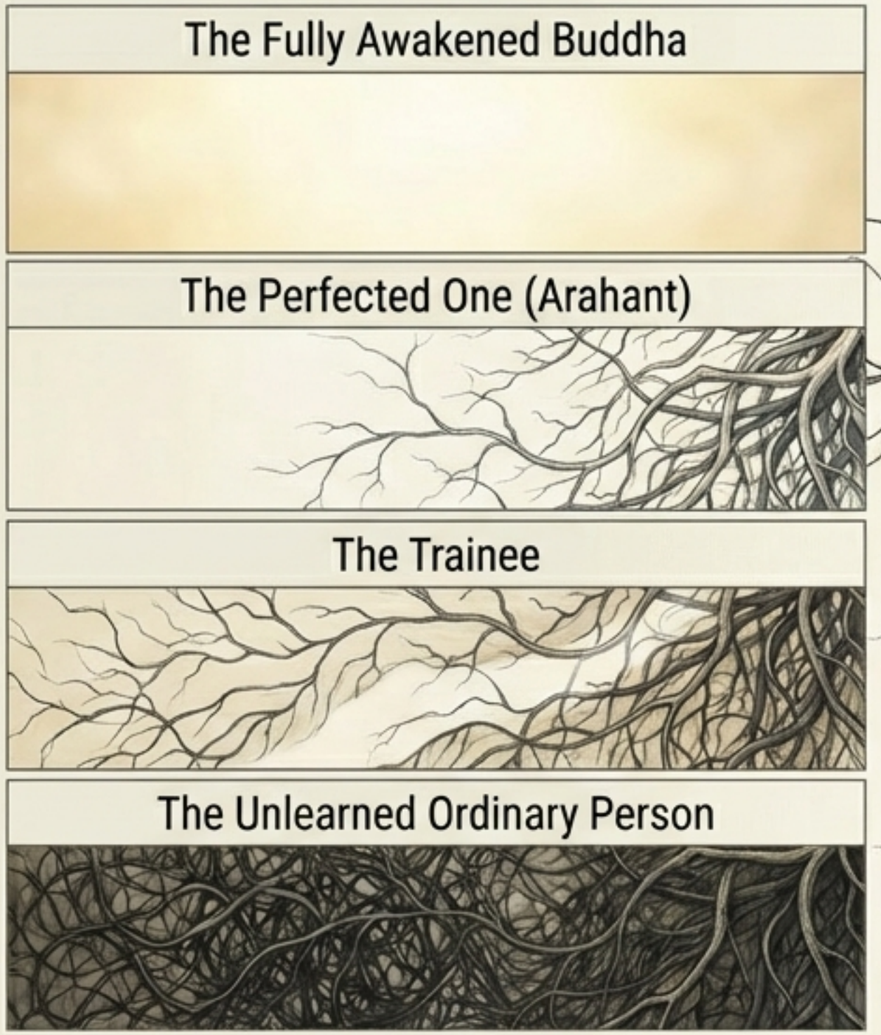
A Journey Through Four Levels of Understanding

The *sutta* analyzes how four different types of individuals relate to reality through the process of perceiving and conceiving. Their responses reveal a progressive path from entanglement to liberation.



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Stage 1: The Ordinary Person's Entanglement

Cognitive Formula

Step 1: Perceives "earth as earth."

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Step 2: Conceives of earth (identifies with it, makes it "mine," approves it).

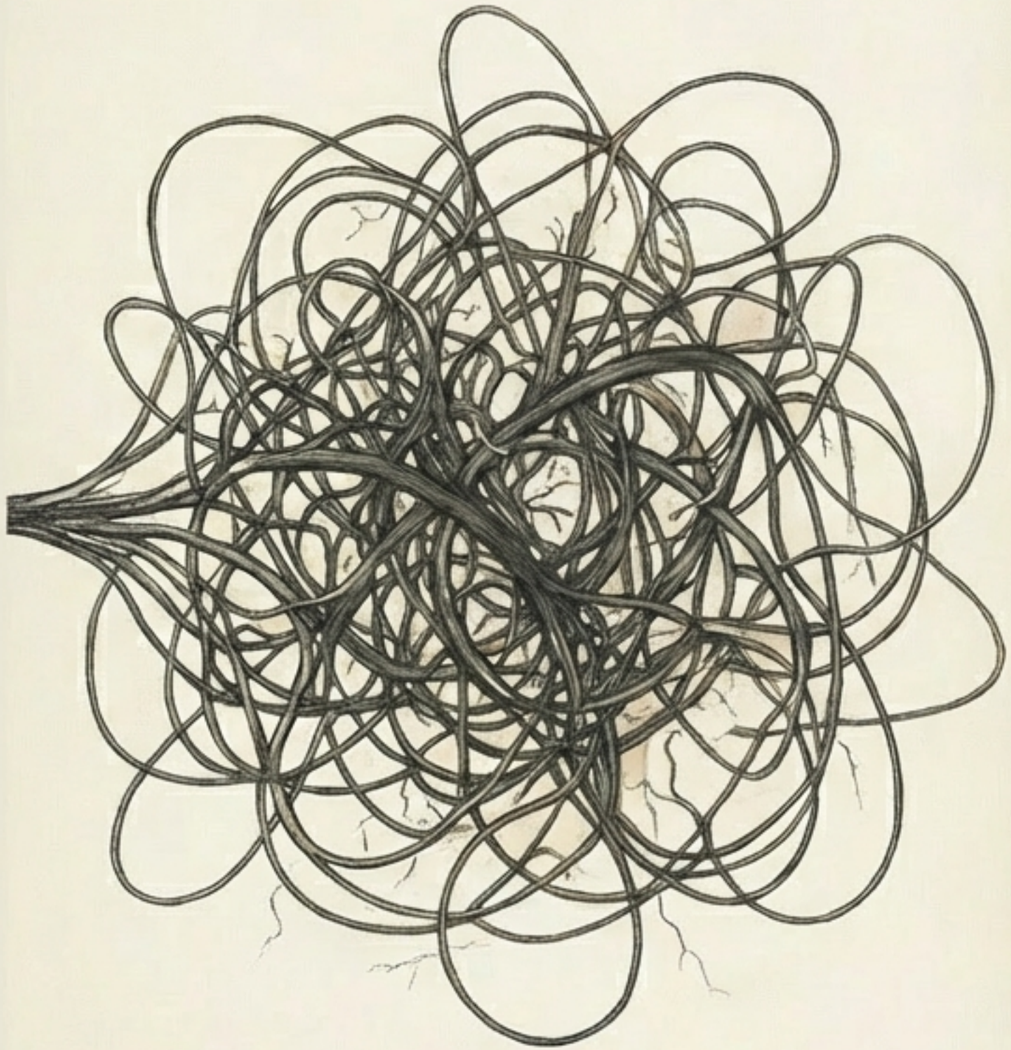
The Critical Question & Answer

Why does this happen?

The Buddha's answer: "Because they haven't completely understood it, I say."

Key Insight

For the ordinary person, perception immediately triggers a process of self-identification and approval, creating a world of "I" and "mine."



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The Pattern of Conceiving Pervades All Experience

This cognitive process is not limited to the four great elements. It is applied universally to a comprehensive list of 24 categories of experience, covering the entire spectrum of reality from the physical to the highest meditative states and even the concept of liberation itself (Nibbāna/extinguishment).

1. Earth
2. Water
3. Fire
4. Air
5. Creatures
6. Gods
7. Progenitor
8. Divinity
9. Streaming Radiance
10. Universal Beauty
11. Abundant Fruit
12. The Vanquisher
13. Infinite Space
14. Infinite Consciousness
15. Nothingness
16. Neither Perception nor Non-perception
17. The Seen
18. The Heard
19. The Thought
20. The Known
21. Oneness
22. Diversity
23. All
24. Extinguishment

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Stage 2: The Trainee's Aspiration

Cognitive Formula

Step 1: **Directly Knows** "earth as earth."

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Step 2: Is instructed: "let them not conceive it… let them not approve earth."

The Critical Question & Answer

Why this restraint?

The Buddha's answer: "So that they may completely understand it, I say."

Key Insight

The path begins with direct knowledge combined with a conscious effort to stop the process of mental proliferation. The motivation is aspirational—to achieve a future understanding.

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The Turning Point: From Aspiration to Attainment

The difference between the Trainee and the Perfected One lies not in their action (both avoid conceiving), but in their reason. This is the shift from process to result.

The Trainee's Reason:

"So that they may completely understand it."

ASPIRATION

The Perfected One's Reason:

"Because they have completely understood it."

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Stage 3: The Perfected One's Realization

A mendicant who is perfected— "with defilements ended, who has completed the spiritual journey… utterly ended the fetter of continued existence, and is rightly freed through enlightenment."

Cognitive Formula

Step 1: **Directly Knows** "earth as earth."

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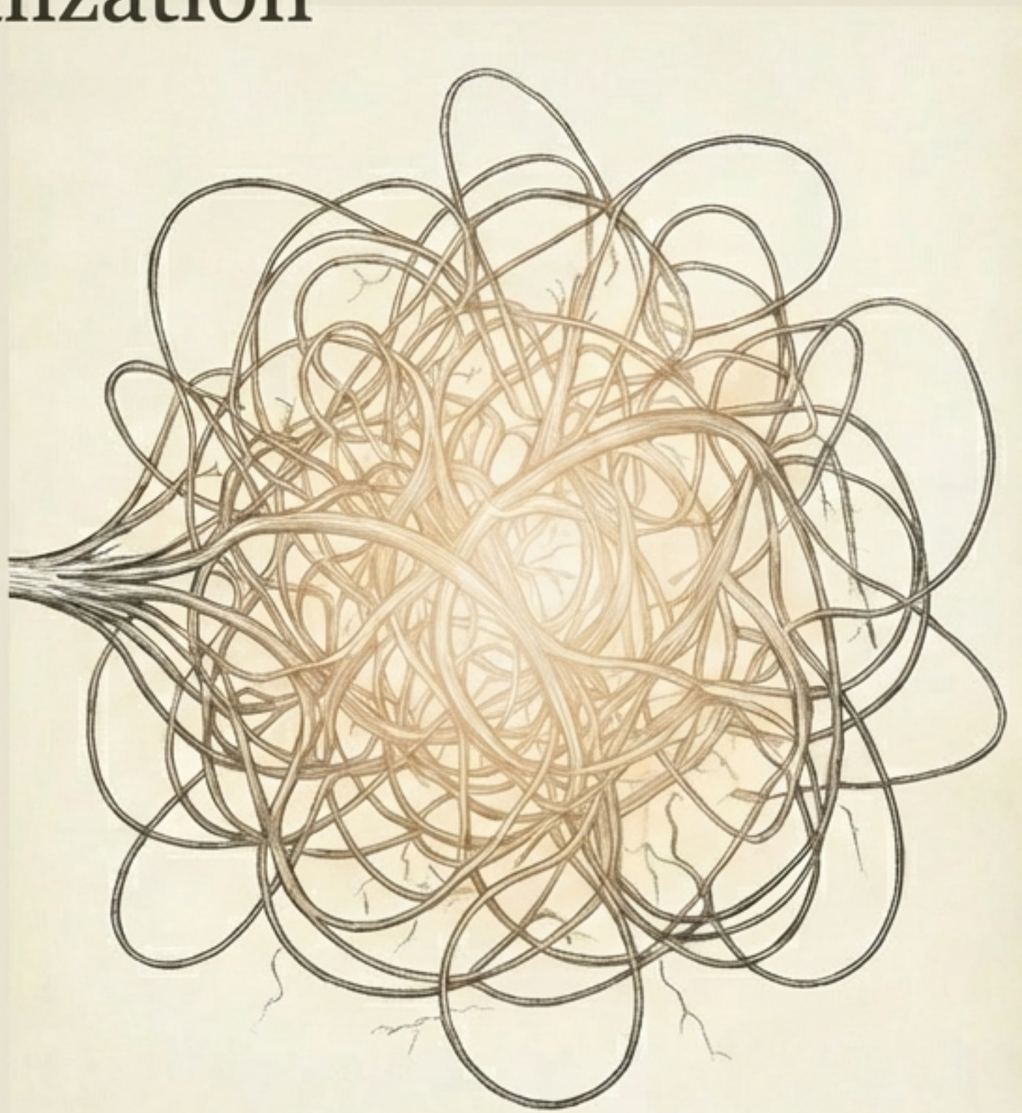
Step 2: **Does Not Conceive** of earth. Does not approve it.

The Critical Question & Answer

Why?

The Buddha's answer: "Because they have completely understood it, I say."



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The Nature of Complete Understanding: Freedom from Defilement

The Buddha further elaborates on *why* the Perfected One has completely understood. Their freedom from conceiving is rooted in the destruction of the three poisons:

Freedom from Greed

"Because they're free of greed due to the ending of greed."

Freedom from Hate

"Because they're free of hate due to the ending of hate."

Freedom from Delusion

"Because they're free of delusion due to the ending of delusion."

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Stage 4: The Buddha's Supreme Awakening

"The Realized One, the perfected one, the fully awakened Buddha."

Cognitive Formula

Step 1:
Directly Knows "earth as earth."

Step 2:
Does not conceive it... does not approve it.

The Initial Reason

Why?
"Because the Realized One has completely understood it to the end, I say."

But the Buddha's explanation reveals an even more fundamental reason...

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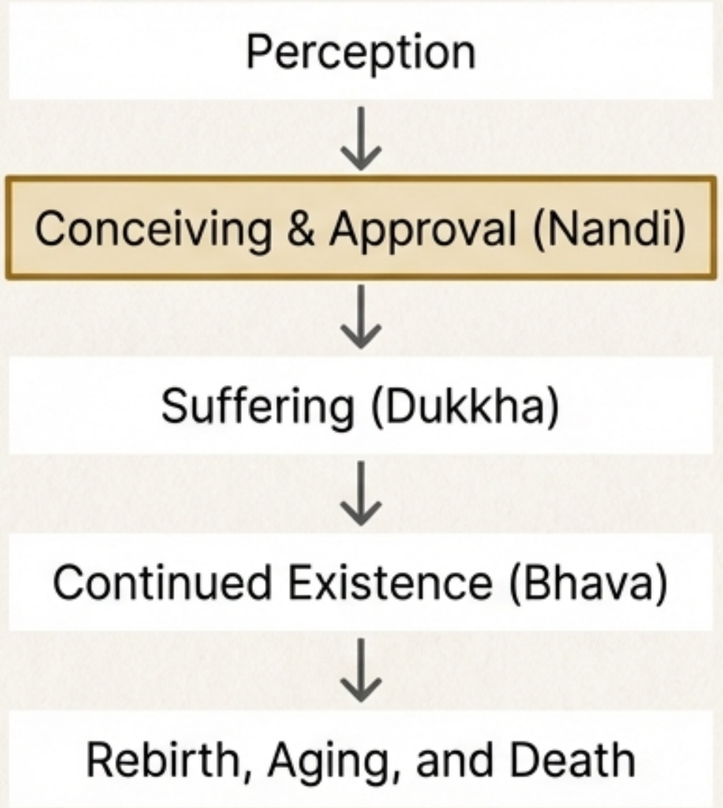
The Final Insight: Approval is the Root of Suffering

“Because he has understood that **approval is the root of suffering**, and that rebirth comes from continued existence; whoever has come to be gets old and dies.”



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The Path to Awakening is the Cessation of Craving

"That's why the Realized One—with the ending, fading away, **cessation, giving up**, and **letting go of all cravings**—has awakened to the supreme perfect awakening, I say."

Key Insight

The ultimate freedom lies in breaking the chain at its source: ending the craving that fuels the act of "approval."

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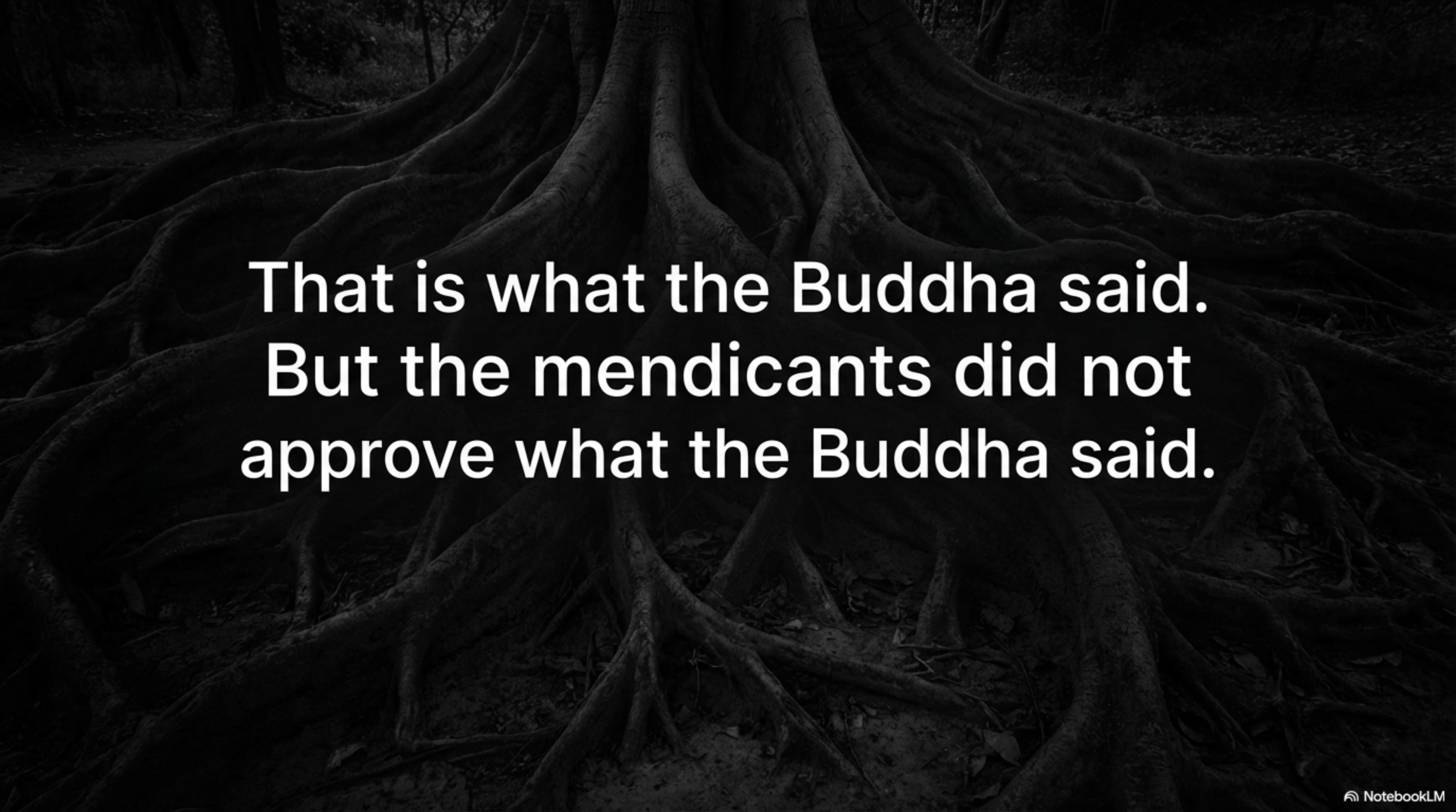
That is what the Buddha said.
But the mendicants did not
approve what the Buddha said.
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